INTRODUCTION

Ecology has come to play a central role in our lives in recent years. It has become impossible to talk about man’s relation to nature without referring to ecology. Though the term “ecology” appeared in 1866, it did not enter the vernacular for almost a hundred years. Donald Worster the historian, in his work Nature’s Economy: The Roots of Ecology, points out that the “idea of ecology is much older than the name” (VIII).

All religious treatises reflect this message and try to help man understand the intricacies of the natural world. When we examine Indian literature, we find it is replete with references to animals, which are associated with various gods as their vahanas or vehicles, and are thus worshipped. The Vedas, the Mahabharatha and the Ramayana speak about forests and forest dwelling sages who strive for enlightenment. These texts also teach the importance of Ahimsa or non-violence. Similarly Lord Mahavira, the Jain saint exhorted people to avoid inflicting pain on any living being. Budhism like-wise enjoins a reverent and nonviolent attitude not only to all sentient beings but also, with great emphasis, to trees. Other religions like Judaism, Confucianism, Shinto and Taoism also preach the importance of nature and its inhabitants.

Though all religious texts convey the idea of protecting nature, modern man has failed in communing with it harmoniously. His so called superior intelligence,
greed and arrogance has led him to assume that this planet is meant to serve his needs only.

This was not the situation in ancient times. Early man lived in total harmony with his surroundings fully aware of his bondage and unity with his fellow humans and with other creatures of the universe. Urbanisation of the world has impelled man to be more materialistic thereby causing great harm to the fragile web of nature.

In this increasingly urban society, nature writing certainly plays a vital role in teaching us to value the natural world. The most important function of literature today, as observed by Glen A. Love, “is to redirect human consciousness to full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (237). It can to some extent influence both man’s perception of nature and his responses to it ultimately transforming him into an ecologically sensitive person.

Ecology has been a recurrent theme in art and literature of ancient times. Classical literary traditions reflect an abiding concern with natural landscapes. Plants, animals, mountains, seas and sky figure as a “complete system in which human beings find or create their proper places” (Meeker 9). The writings of the Greek poets like Homer, Sophocles, Plato and that of the Roman poets Virgil, Theocritus and Juvenal emphasise the importance of nature.

The writings of the Middle Ages also show a keen interest in the richness and diversity of nature. It was with the rise of romanticism in the late eighteenth
and early nineteenth centuries that a revival of the pagan outlook toward nature came into being. Again it was during this century that many travellers from Europe, kindled by a keen interest in wildlife journeyed into the deep forests of the tropics. They rejoiced in the abundance of life and duly recorded them. Perhaps the best known and influential person to document the fecundity of animal life was the Englishman Charles Darwin.

Darwin’s theories regarding evolution had a profound influence on the writers of the twentieth century. They came to realise that plants and animals were much more closely related to man than had been previously assumed. There was a general transformation in the nature of sentiments towards animals. These creatures that were till then considered as objects of sport began to be seen in a different perspective. They became a “feel-good” factor in people’s lives and an object of human caring, love and responsibility (Franklin 36).

Animals began to figure in literary works and mass media especially children’s media to instill patriotism. Birds and animals became national symbols. This helped in establishing a general knowledge of the national flora and fauna thereby enabling citizens to “assert a national pride, interest and, later, concern and responsibility” (Franklin 39).

During the twentieth century writers like Kipling, James Thurber, Walter de La Mare etc., brought forth their works which dealt with the theme of animals. One of the most popular fictions on animals and nature was Rudyard Kipling’s
Jungle Books, which even today remain children's classics. Though mainly a collection of fables, they illustrate profound truths. Martin Seymour Smith believes that it is in these books Kipling worked out his notion of what he called the Law. He was able to express his ideas through the comparatively simple channel offered by the form of children's fiction. In this world we find the "beasts are less beast like" (235).

Similarly Joy Adamson's book Living Free which tells the story of a binding relationship between the author and her pet lioness serves to highlight the theory that a perfect human-animal relationship can be established on earth.

There wouldn't be many who have not been captivated by the heartwarming true stories of Dr. James Herriot, the Yorkshire veterinarian. What makes his books so appealing is the vet himself – his good humour and ability to laugh at himself, his love of animals, and most of all – his gifts as a healer and as a natural storyteller. He has a way, not only with animals, but also with words. And in telling us how he feels, he enables us to feel with him. His memoirs which go by the titles, All Creatures Great and Small, All Things Bright and Beautiful, All Things Wise and Wonderful, and The Lord God Made Them All, take us into the world of farmers and pet owners and enchant us with his stirring tales of love and sacrifice. Writing with his characteristic humour and love for all living beings, Herriot expresses his unbounded joy in the English countryside. These tales evoke a sense of reassurance, leading us to believe that the world is after all a place
where patience, kindness and love make a difference, and where laughter eases a crisis.

From the works of these writers we come to recognize that we are the same as animals; animals are individuals like us and therefore it is not right to harm them. On the other hand, humans are different because they are beings capable of changing the world and society toward perfection. This idea suggests that as enlightened human beings our prime duty is to make the world a better place to live in.

The works of Gerald Durrell reflect this attitude towards nature and its beings and they also tell us what modernity is doing to nature. His accounts of animal collecting trips to various corners of the world reveal him to be a person imbued with love and sympathy for animals. As each one of his animals emerges as a distinctive and engaging personality, the author reveals his zoological knowledge as well as his gift for understanding the queerest of creatures. As Tim Hilchey says: “Mr. Durrell was quite well known for his humorously engaging books about animals as well as for his conservation efforts.” His first book, The Overloaded Ark, written at the suggestion of his elder brother, Lawrence Durrell, recounted his adventures while collecting animals in the British Cameroons in West Africa. This expedition, conducted at the age of twenty-one, was the first of many zoological expeditions undertaken by Durrell to places like Nigeria, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, India and the Soviet Union.
Durrell is credited with creating on the island of Jersey a zoological park, which is now the headquarters of the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. His aim was to create a sanctuary in which he could establish breeding colonies of those threatened species, so that even if they became extinct in the wild state, they would not vanish forever. Dr. Mary Pearl, executive director of the Wildlife Preservation Trust International, says, “He was the first person to think of the zoo as existing for the animals rather than for the people who come to see them,” and “that meant two things. First, that the animals would have to be treated humanely and with dignity. Second, he was also the first person to suggest that captive breeding of endangered species could play a role in conservation efforts” (qtd in Hilchey).

Even as a child Durrell dreamed of owning a zoo:

Most children at the tender age of six or so are generally full of the most impractical schemes for becoming policemen, firemen or engine drivers when they grow up, but when I was that age I could not be bothered with such mundane ambitions. I knew exactly what I was going to do: I was going to have my own zoo. At the time this did not seem to me (and still does not seem) a very unreasonable or outrageous ambition. My friends and relatives – who had long thought that I was mental owing to the fact that I evinced no interest in anything that did not have fur, feathers, scales or chitin – accepted this as just another manifestation of my weak state of mind. They felt that, if they ignored my oft-repeated remarks about owning my own zoo, I would eventually grow out of it. As the years passed,
however, to the consternation of my friends and relatives, my resolve to have my own zoo grew greater and greater, and eventually, after going on a number of expeditions to bring back animals for other zoos, I felt the time was ripe to acquire my own. (Menagerie 9)

And he fulfilled his dream after several years. By this time he had kept many wild animals as pets at home as well as during his expeditions. Though a very “tedious, irritating, and frustrating business,” it nevertheless gave him a good deal of pleasure:

Many people have asked me why I like animals, and I have always found it a difficult question to answer. You might just as well ask me why I like eating. But, apart from the obvious interest and pleasure that animals give me, there is another aspect as well. I think that their chief charm lies in the fact that they have all the basic qualities of a human being but with none of the hypocrisy which is now apparently such an essential in the world of man. With an animal you do know more or less where you are: If it does not like you it tells you so in no uncertain manner; if it likes you, again it leaves you in no doubt. (Encounters 107)

Along with his work at the Jersey Zoo and the wonderful boyhood experiences on the Greek island of Corfu, the various travels provided the basis for many of Durrell’s 37 books, including the best sellers, My Family and Other Animals, The Bafut Beagles, A Zoo in My Luggage, etc. His extraordinary love for animals also inspired his fictional works, including the novels, Rosie is My Relative and The Mockery Bird. Other zoo professionals are now seeing these
books as having helped create a huge new constituency of support for scientific conservation work. As Sir David Attenborough said:

He was responsible for changing people’s attitudes to zoology and changing their agenda. He showed them small animals could be as interesting as apes and elephants. His work with endangered species was incredible in that he could persuade them to breed in captivity. He then returned them to the wild. He was a pioneer with a marvellous sense of humour. (qtd in Boseley)

Durrell’s expeditions naturally attracted the hungry television camera, and avid readers devoured his books. It was through his books, that Durrell was able to introduce the natural world to a wide and predominantly young audience. His enthusiastic personality helped colour his vivid, comical but kindly observation of the eccentricities of various human and animal species. A Guardian correspondent observes that he was adept in “recalling surprises, perils, discoveries and kindness in the life of a professional animal collector traveling the world in the search of the unlikely and the unusual.” Simon Hicks of the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust says:

He was one of the most multifaceted people you could possibly meet. He was inspiring. Nobody really met Gerry without being changed somehow. There are people in life who enhance life. Gerry did so on a massive scale through his books. He had the child’s genius, which most of us lose, for seeing things in a multi-coloured scheme, which dulls in most of us as we get older. Somehow he managed to retain it. (qtd in Waterhouse)
Durrell, as said earlier had a marvellous sense of humour but he was quite "vitriolic" about man's blind arrogance towards nature. It was this arrogance that led man to pillage and plunder the precious wealth of this universe. Alexandra, one of Durrell's companions, speaking about it to Douglas Botting, Durrell's biographer, specifies:

In his career he must have seen phenomenal destruction. Sometimes I think he would have cheerfully wiped out half the human race to get the numbers down. He has a passion for every living thing, especially the lowly, including man on an individual basis, but not man en masse, because their record was too damning. He didn't bat an eyelid about eating animal meat and he was fairly sanguine about the natural system where everything eats everything else. It was just the mass destruction he couldn't stand. (qtd in Botting 435)

Durrell's rancour is evident when he calls man "the most monstrous predator . . ., Homo sapiens, a misnomer if ever there was one" (Ark's Ann 81).

Durrell's efforts in awakening eco-consciousness in people through his writings deserve a thorough examination. This study is an attempt to show that his literary style evolved out of his intense love of the earth. His conviction of living harmoniously in this world will also be touched upon. Though the topic is "Ecology as Literature," I will also dwell on Durrell's efforts as a conservationist, for which he is equally well known. Durrell's career as a conservationist as well as a writer is closely related; without one, the other wouldn't have blossomed.
In the first chapter I have delineated the various literary works on ecology, arising from a deep felt outrage against the environmental catastrophe taking place all around us. The second chapter concentrates on Durrell’s account of various conservational activities, his expeditions to several parts of the world, the fulfillment of his long-cherished dream of owning a zoo and his various experiments with breeding pairs etc. I have also added several comments by writers and ecologists on ecological issues in order to highlight Durrell’s role in saving animals from extinction. Chapter three deals with Durrell’s family and his various friends both human and non-human. I have tried to show how Durrell, by presenting his family and several animal friends living in harmony in the same surroundings, is actually pleading the readers to live in a similar way with the flora and fauna of their ecosphere.

The fourth chapter focuses on Durrell’s writing skills – his ability as a scientist, a poet and a humorist. He is certainly all three, and these three naturally emerge in his style. His dextrous use of imagery, which is one of the striking features of his style, has been highlighted in the various humorous incidents described.

The last chapter highlights Durrell’s rapport with various animal species he encountered during his expeditions and otherwise. It also reveals his depth of emotion on beholding the beauteous forms of nature like the cataract, the evergreen tropical forests, a river full of small flowers etc.
In this study, I have taken up his eight books – *My Family and Other Animals, Birds Beasts and Relatives, The Garden of the Gods, Menagerie Manor, The Stationary Ark, The Ark’s Anniversary, A Zoo in My Luggage* and *The Bafut Beagles*. Quotations from other books and his only novel *Rosy is My Relative* are parenthetically documented with shortened titles as given in Abbreviations, and these shortened titles are used in the text of the dissertation also.

This study, I expect, will be of interest to the students of English, Ecology and the general reader as well.